

City of Laughter: On the Traditions and Trends of Hong Kong Comedy Films

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In Hong Kong, a city that has undergone so much transformation in terms of spatial changes, political circumstances, and socioeconomic development within the short course of the 20th century, comedy films seem to be the most popular form of relief, if not remedy, for its people to release their stress while living through these mutations. Like the city itself, the cinema of Hong Kong has been flexibly and creatively adapting to changing conditions, such as modes of production, market reception, and the movement of personnel, as well as global trends and technological changes in screen media. The emergence and development of popular genres could be understood as responses to the cultural dynamics that keep defining and repositioning Hong Kong culture in general. Such a culturalist perspective remains the dominant approach in the study of Hong Kong cinema, especially given the city's significant political shift toward the end of the 20th century – when it went from being a British colony to being a Special Administrative Region of the PRC after 1997.

The change of sovereignty inevitably became the major context in understanding Hong Kong's cultural configurations from the 1980s onwards, since the ideological shift has led to multifarious responses, resistance, adaptation, appropriation, expectation and disappointment, and hope and fear among the citizens who started to worry about their future whilst waiting to see if they would retain the “stability and prosperity” that was promoted by the government at that time. The popularity of comedy could be explained as corresponding to this psychological need to cope with uncertainty when the temporary laughter produced by popular cinema offered people timely therapy to help them live with the complicated social atmosphere. When the handover became history, comedy films produced after the heavy blow of the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997 and the SARS outbreak in 2003 became reflective of a neoliberalist society where individual agency is often offset by the exacerbation of social inequalities and capitalist consumerism. At the same time, the trend of Hong Kong-Mainland co-productions after the mid-2000s led to a decreasing number of comedy films when it was rarely possible to create jokes and gags that could

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be enjoyed by audiences from the Mainland and Hong Kong. With the further decline of the genre in recent years, as shown by the decreasing number of comedy films from the aftermath of the Umbrella Movement in 2014 until the Anti-ELAB movement in 2019, local audiences' shift to a preference for social realist dramas could probably be related to the changing ethos and pathos of Hong Kong as well.

Comedy is not the only genre that draws attention to the culturalist perspective, as it is equally relevant to examine the rise and decline of other genres in the transformative sociopolitical context of the period under discussion. While scholarly writings on kung fu films, gangster and cop films, and social melodrama have been quite common among local and international scholars, those on comedy films are relatively insufficient, although nine out of the top ten box office hits of local cinema over the 1980s and 1990s were comedies. Perhaps it is worth noting that the ontological character of comedy in general, namely the combination of the universalist goal of inducing laughter and the demand for contextualized knowledge, makes it difficult to interrogate this popular genre with critical depth. At the same time, critical analysis is especially challenging when examining Hong Kong comedy films because the need to know Cantonese popular idioms and puns is a major obstacle for non-local scholars and readers seeking to grasp their multilayered meanings. In light of a growing interest in the genre, this review article serves as an introduction that aims at contextualizing the development of Hong Kong comedy films from the 1950s to recent years. I hope this review article will invite more comprehensive studies of this significant corpus of Hong Kong films, as well as unfolding the cultural dynamics of Hong Kong culture through a comic lens. As David Bordwell suggests, instead of relying on reflective metaphors or reading the films as reflections of the mood of the moment, "popular cinema is better considered as part of an open-ended dialogue with its culture."¹ To expand on this statement, I propose that such an open-minded attitude is especially important in the intellectual inquiry into comedy films. Even though the comic genre seems to resist in-depth analysis, this only means that there is a greater need to set its cultural meanings against its subversiveness.

¹ David Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment* (Wisconsin: Irvington Way Institute Press, 2011), 23.

HONG KONG CINEMA THROUGH A COMIC LENS

Scholarship in Hong Kong cinema has mostly adopted historical and culturalist perspectives, as the city's socio-economic-political transformations have effectively been taken to explain the trends of cinematic production, circulation, and reception. While the boom and doom of the city against its postcoloniality and globalization have been in the spotlight during the past decades, the recycling discourse of the survival and death of Hong Kong cinema is equally intriguing to filmmakers, a general audience, and researchers, since the development of the film industry is understood as being closely connected to the fate of the city. Over the years, scholarly monographs that focus on Hong Kong cinema, such as Stephen Teo's *Hong Kong Cinema: The Extra Dimension* (1997), Yingchi Chu's *Hong Kong Cinema: Coloniser, Motherland and Self* (2003), Pak Tong Cheuk's *Hong Kong New Wave Cinema 1978–2000* (2008), and Vivian P. Y. Lee's *Hong Kong Cinema Since 1997: The Post-Nostalgic Imagination* (2009), among others, provide a holistic mapping of different historical frameworks in explaining the development of Hong Kong cinema. On the other hand, David Bordwell's *Planet Hong Kong* (2011, second edition) remains one of the major entry points to understanding Hong Kong popular cinema through its tracing of the stylistic characteristics and creative energies of filmmakers who have earned both critical and commercial success from the 1970s onwards. Numerous anthologies examining the diversity of Hong Kong cinema have also been published. Among these, *The Cinema of Hong Kong: History, Arts, Identity* (2000, ed. Poshek Fu and David Desser), *At Full Speed: Hong Kong Cinema in a Borderless World* (2001, ed. Esther C. M. Yau), and *A Companion to Hong Kong Cinema* (2015, ed. Esther M. K. Cheung, Gina Marchetti, and Esther C. M. Yau) are crucial works that cover historical, cultural, auteur, and generic approaches adopted to understand the thematic interests, aesthetic concerns, global-local-transnational flows, gender, social class, and other cultural issues at stake in the study of Hong Kong cinema. While many of these works do pay attention to specific genres, with kung fu / martial arts / action films being the dominant subject of discussion, comedy films are relatively little discussed.²

Perhaps this negligence is due to the fact that comedy has never been an easy genre for analysis. With the general assumption that plot development and complications in characterization are deemed secondary to situational gags, the genre seems to be an unsophisticated subject for in-depth analysis. Yet, for

² In addition to international scholarship, local critics began to make an attempt to offer focused examination of Hong Kong comedy films, as in Chang, Wai-hung, ed. *Xianggang xiju dianying de ziwo xiuyang* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Critics Society, 2016).

ages and across cultures, comedy has been a porous genre that includes a broad range of styles, sub-categories, and performance practices.³ Although the goal of this genre is straightforward and simple—to make people laugh and to create a sense of happiness—the method it uses to do so is seldom easy to describe. This is because comedy is often understood through its “tonal quality” instead of its structural characteristics.⁴ The manipulations and uplifting of emotions are often beyond structuralization. While creating a happy ending might not be a difficult task for scriptwriters, the effect of laughter often results from accidents, surprises, and involuntary actions, which demands careful calculation of gags or creative improvisation by the comedians. This effort-loaded yet seemingly effortless comic effect not only defines the genre but also identifies its paradoxical nature. At the same time, the “disintegrative nature of laughter,” the “temporary derangement of meaning,” and the “momentary collapse” of “the sphere of orderly and articulate meaning” illustrate the significance of the ungraspable and the disruption of the established order.⁵ The temporariness of laughter is often stressed as an escapist feature of comedy. Audiences are invited to remove themselves from harsh reality for a while, and they can seek the transient overthrow of power through the comic off-centeredness. The theoretical framework of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque is therefore useful in explaining the social function of comedy—that while comedy celebrates the overthrow of power, its momentary escapism also sustains the established order as a result.⁶ A successful comedy is also socially coded in such a way that the audience can identify the cinematic elements related to current issues or specific cultural features. Just as Bergson states, that “[l]aughter must answer to certain requirements of life in common. It must have a social signification,”⁷ this perspective on the social function of comedy is shared by most scholars who study the genre, and it is particularly useful in understanding the emergence of Hong Kong comedy films since the postwar period.

The growth of Hong Kong comedy films, just like the growth of other genres, has emerged out of the postwar hardship, migratory social pattern, and blossoming economic development, as well as political changes. From its rapid growth from the postwar period until its contraction in recent years, there have been different moments over the decades when audiences have been at-

³ Andrew Stott, *Comedy* (New York and London: Routledge, 2005), 1–2.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Terry Eagleton, *Humour* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2019), 4.

⁶ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 7–8.

⁷ Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1911), 7–8.

tracted to different comic elements that are socially coded. Hong Kong comedy films are always linguistically specific to the times of production and reception, and “the reading of Hong Kong comedy is further complicated by its heavy dependence on Cantonese dialogical gags.”⁸ While linguistic complication in comedy warrants a separate study, and one should not ignore the influence of Mandarin comedy films made by southbound filmmakers in Hong Kong before the late 1970s, this article will focus on Cantonese comedy films in Hong Kong.

The farcical performance, fast pace, and quirky mode of production of Hong Kong comedy films illustrate the cultural function of comedy in Hong Kong’s urban development and social and economic growth. Given their stylistic features and linguistic characteristics, Hong Kong comedy films are most apt in representing the formation of local identity of Hong Kongers. While it is generally agreeable that all comedies, especially those from Hollywood, call for universal situations to create shared sentiments and identification among audience across different cultural backgrounds, Hong Kong comedy films often run against this grain with their distinctively local characterization that may seem enigmatic and incomprehensible to those who are not familiar with everyday life in Hong Kong. Before moving onto subsections that introduce the chronological development of Hong Kong comedy films, I would like to summarize this overall development and propose that there are several major thematic interests and conceptual features that should be addressed in further scholarly discussions.

First, the urban setting of grassroots people has been widely identified among the urban comedies of the 1950s onwards. The discourse of affluence and stories of social mobility in the fast-growing city have long been defining subjects across Hong Kong cinema, and comedy films often provide an alternative vision in critically responding to the social changes experienced by commoners. From the grassroots comedies of the 1950s and 1960s, the social satire of Michael Hui 許冠文 in the 1970s, and political comedies in the early 1990s right through to the romantic comedies of Johnnie To 杜琪峯 and Edmund Pang 彭浩翔 in the 2000s, Hong Kong comedy films have shared this spatial interest in the transformative urban space of Hong Kong to different degrees. Second, instead of understanding comedy as a “pure” genre, it is crucial to note that Hong Kong comedy films are mostly hybridized. From the kung fu comedies of the 1970s and the horror comedies of the 1980s to Jeffrey Lau’s 劉鎮偉 tragicomedies from the 1990s onwards, Hong Kong comedy films have defined themselves with multifarious elements that are at times mutually contradicto-

⁸ Jenny Lau, “Besides Fists and Blood: Hong Kong Comedy and Its Master of the Eighties,” *Cinema Journal* 37, no. 2 (1998): 24.

ry. The maximized sensational effect of genre hybridization also defines Hong Kong cinema as highly flexible and tactical. Third, although there have been several distinctive comedians over the years, it is worth noting that comedy could be examined beyond stardom and performance studies, and as part of auteur theory. While there are some directors who seem to have made comedy films only, such as Raymond Wong 黃百鳴, Clifton Ko 高志森, Wong Jing 王晶, Jeffrey Lau, and Vincent Kok 谷德超, internationally known auteurs from the New Wave to the Second Wave onwards, such as Tsui Hark 徐克, Ann Hui 許鞍華, Mabel Cheung 張婉婷, Alex Law 羅啟銳, Wong Kar-wai 王家衛, Fruit Chan 陳果, Johnnie To and Wai Kar-fai 韋家輝, have all ventured into their own versions of comedy films as well. The current scholarship on Hong Kong cinema could be expanded by examining this specific corpus of popular genre films made by well-established filmmakers.

SETTING THE TRADITIONS OF HONG KONG COMEDY: 1950S AND 1960S

As Yingchi Chu notes, popular film genres in Hong Kong define a specific cultural character for the city.⁹ Although Hollywood cinema has been the key inspiration for comedy and gangster genres made in Hong Kong, it has been alloyed with local cultural elements in the creative process of adaptation and appropriation. In addition to Hollywood influence, cultural appropriation also took place in postwar Hong Kong when the traditions of comedy developed by the Shanghai film industry in the 1930s and 1940s found a new niche in Hong Kong. From 1950 to 1970, over three thousand Cantonese films were made and shown in Hong Kong. As Jenny Lau summarizes, “[o]ut of this corpus, about 750 films (about 25 percent) were comedy, indicating a steady local preference for jokes and laughter.”¹⁰ With the enrichment of the city’s creative forces by the vibrant inflow of the migrant population, Hong Kong cinema developed rapidly. The traditions of mainland Chinese comedy were transplanted into Mandarin films and, in turn, Cantonese film production was also influenced by the thematic interests, scale of production, and stylistic elements from these Mandarin films. In addition to comedy films that were rooted in Cantonese operatic traditions, with plotlines associated with folklore, popular anecdotes, and operatic stories, urban comedies in Cantonese began to gain popularity as well. Films such as the Broker Lai (*Ging gei lai* 經紀拉) series (1950s) and Two Fools (*Leung so* 兩

⁹ Yingchi Chu, *Hong Kong Cinema: Coloniser, Motherland and Self* (London and New York; Routledge, 2003), 67.

¹⁰ Lau, “Besides,” 24.

傻) series (1950s) drew attention to people from different social classes and offered comic portrayals of working-class people living and surviving in the city at the time of “accumulative capitalism.”¹¹ From the mid-1960s onwards, urban romance and screwball comedies with modern settings became major productions in Cantonese cinema, following the trend of Mandarin cinema.¹² Gender relationships, farcical stories about courtship with class differences, and binary characterizations (such as selfish landladies and submissive tenants, exploitative employers and oppressed employees, and fierce housewives and cheating husbands) were common characteristics of Cantonese comedy films at the time.

Scholarship on Hong Kong comedy films from the 1950s and 1960s is rare, likely due to the fact that the films themselves, mostly un-subtitled, are hard to acquire. Although P. K. Leung’s 梁秉鈞 seminal essay “Urban Cinema and the Cultural Identity of Hong Kong” and Poshek Fu’s 傅葆石 “The 1960s: Modernity, Youth Culture, and Hong Kong Cantonese Cinema” offer a comprehensive overview of Cantonese cinema in the 1950s and 1960s against the backdrop of urbanization, modernity, and emerging youth culture, the two articles do not pay specific attention to the growth of the comedy genre. Sam Ho’s 何思穎 “Duck Cackling: Hong Kong Comedy” gives a historical mapping of prewar and postwar Hong Kong comedy films that covers various stylistic features, providing a concise summary of how comedic elements such as satire, slapstick, screwball, and other localized components have defined Cantonese and Mandarin film productions. One of the earliest, most systematic studies of the genre in this period is the special essay collection published by the Ninth Hong Kong International Film Festival in 1985. Titled *The Traditions of Hong Kong Comedy* (*Xianggang xiju dianying chuantong* 香港喜劇電影的傳統), this bilingual collection studies the film titles selected for the retrospective program about postwar Hong Kong comedy films and gathers nine articles that are devoted to discussion of Cantonese comedy films from the late 1940s to 1969. In addition to short pieces that introduce comedians and comedy filmmakers of the period, such as Ng Wui 吳回, Mok Hong-si 莫康時, Tang Kee-chan 鄧寄塵, Ko Lo-chuen 高佬泉, Leung Sing-bo 梁醒波, Sun Ma Si-tsang 新馬師曾, Tam Lan-hing 譚蘭卿, To Sam-gu 陶三姑, and Sai Gwa-pau 西瓜刨, Ng Ho’s 吳昊 “A Preliminary Plot Analysis of Cantonese Comedy” provides a detailed categorization of various plot structures, characterizations, and narrative styles found in Can-

¹¹ Hong Kong society was experiencing the period of “accumulative capitalism,” in which common people were in pursuit of abundance and survived through thrifty practices while dreaming of wealth, prosperity, success, and fortune. See Ng Ho, “A Preliminary Plot Analysis of Cantonese Comedy,” in *Traditions of Hong Kong Comedy* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Urban Council, 1985), 22.

¹² Lau, “Besides,” 31.

tonese comedies, which were shaped by Cantonese operatic traits, comedy of manners, and Hollywood romantic comedies of the 1950s. The two major sub-genres—social satire and romantic comedy—were developed in this period and they would continue to significantly define Hong Kong comedy films in the decades to come.

Law Kar's 羅卡 "A Comparative Analysis of Cantonese and Mandarin Comedies" provides a comprehensive overview of the root and route of postwar Hong Kong comedy films. In addition to contextualizing the relationship between Mandarin and Cantonese cinema in Hong Kong, distinguishing the characteristics of Cantonese comedies in the 1950s, and explaining the trend of urban comedies in the 1960s, Law also offers critical commentary on these Cantonese comedies. Pointing out that most of these films focus on character over plot and songs over dialogue, the resulting eclectic and inconsistent style is thus a unique quality of Cantonese comedies: "as varied as the ingredients of a dish of 'chop suey,' a typical comedy of the period would unfailingly feature a wide assortment of seemingly incompatible elements."¹³ This critical remark would also be relevant in understanding the emergence of hybridized comedies in the 1970s and 1980s. Although the development of Hong Kong comedy films from the 1950s and 1960s had rather diverse origins and was commonly understood as a clash of the traditional and modern, this corpus of urban comedy films with their inconsistent styles, thematic interest in contemporary urban lives, characterization of commoners from the grassroots, and bodily performance that blends the traditional and modern gestures would continue to influence the generic features of comedy films in later years, responding to different transformative moments in the city.

HYBRIDIZED COMEDIES AND COMIC ICONS IN THE 1970S AND 1980S

If the postwar decades of the 1950s and 1960s were an age of affluence and social mobility, the 1970s was an age of clashes when the baby boomers began to approach adulthood and join the job market, contributing to generational changes in Hong Kong. The socioeconomic turmoil in the city, namely the stock market crash in 1973, the death of Bruce Lee 李小龍 (also in 1973), and police corruption scandals in 1974, led to an overarching cynicism toward authority and traditional values. When the decline of Cantonese cinema reached its nadir in early 1970s with the dominance of Mandarin films produced by the Shaw

¹³ Law Kar, "A Comparative Analysis of Cantonese and Mandarin Comedies," in *Traditions of Hong Kong Comedy* (Hong Kong; Hong Kong Urban Council, 1985), 15.

Brothers Studio, the surprisingly successful box office results of Chor Yuen's 楚原 *The House of 72 Tenants* (*Cat sap ji gaa fong haak* 七十二家房客) in 1973 brought about the resurgence of Cantonese film production. With its actors and actresses related to TVB, the local television station established in 1967, this social satire about the communal neighborhood of grassroots characters invites the audience to consider the social reflectionist role of popular cinema through a comic lens. The cynical social atmosphere also explains the popularity of genres that adopted a doubtful position toward the established social order.¹⁴ As Shu Kei 舒琪 notes, more than 80 or 90 percent of local film productions from the late 1970s were dominated by three genres; comedy, kung fu, and gangster films, or combinations of them.¹⁵ This popular trend toward violence, sexual exploitation, satire, and revengeful sentiments reflected the prevalent social mentality.

The success of Chor Yuen's social comedy film would be helpful in preparing for the huge popularity of Michael Hui's social satires, as they all responded to the harsh social reality experienced by grassroots people and the underclass, thus providing a voice for the voiceless amid the rapid economic progress and urbanization of Hong Kong society during the 1970s. Films Michael Hui and his brothers directed, wrote, and starred in, such as *Games Gambler Play* (*Gwai ma seung sing* 鬼馬雙星) (1974), *The Last Message* (*Tin choi yu baak chi* 天才與白癡, 1975), *The Private Eyes* (*Bun gan baat leung* 半斤八兩, 1976), *The Contract* (*Maai san kai* 賣身契, 1978), and other comedies from the 1980s and early 1990s, redefined Cantonese comedy films by introducing an auteur framework to the comedy genre with their social satire. Unlike the comic icons of previous decades, who had mainly been comedian performers, Hui established himself as a multi-talented comedian whose works become a significant index for the localization of Hong Kong cultural identity, leading to the growth of scholarly works on his comic oeuvre in both local and international scholarship. For example, Jenny Lau's "Beyond Fists and Blood: Hong Kong Comedy and its Master of the Eighties" offers a detailed analysis of Michael Hui's innovation in the comedy genre by analyzing selected films from the late 1970s and the 1980s. Calling Hui the "master of modern Cantonese comedy," Lau delineates his auteurish style as a successful combination of entertainment with local social concerns, which retains the strength of the Cantonese cinema of the 1950s and 1960s by stressing the comedy of the everyday man. Hui's successful emergence as a comic icon in

¹⁴ For example, Ng Ho coined the phrase "animal comedy" to categorize the soft-porn comedies of the late 1960s and early 1970s, suggesting the implied anarchistic social desire at the time. See Ng Ho, "Xianggang dongwu xiju dianying (1967-70 nian) shitan," in *Zaodong de yidai: Liushi niandai yue pian xinxing*, ed. Law Kar (Hong Kong: Urban Council, 1996), 60-65.

¹⁵ Shu Kei, "My Days at D&B," *A Different Brilliance: The D & B Story* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2020), 36.

the late 1970s echoes the rising popularity of Jackie Chan 成龍, who became a comic icon himself with his performance in Yuen Woo-ping's 袁和平 directorial debut, *Snake in the Eagle's Shadow* (*Se ying diu sau* 蛇形刁手) in 1978. Unlike other kung fu martial arts films of the time, this film combines kung fu and comic elements to maximize its sensational effects and excitement. Together with the blockbuster success of Sammo Hung's 洪金寶 action comedies of the late 1970s and early 1980s, the hybridization of comedies with other popular genres became widely adopted as a formula of box office success.

Among writers commenting on Jackie Chan's cinematic oeuvre, Steve Fore gives a meticulous description of kung fu comedy, which combined the traditional kung fu genre with "slapstick routines, gross-out jokes, and verbal comedy built around puns, anachronisms, and miscellaneous references that ran the gamut of degrees of crudity."¹⁶ Fore states that the comedic variation on the martial arts genre marks the transformation of Hong Kong from a colonial backwater to a rapidly modernizing and fast-paced urban capitalist society. The duality of kung fu comedy as a hybrid genre also illustrates the duality of Hong Kong's cultural identity by combining Hong Kong's capitalist attitudes and modern speech acts with the traditional narratives that set them against the historical background of China.¹⁷ The hybridization of the comedy genre became popularized from the 1980s and 1990s. Horror comedy, gambling comedy, historical comedy, gangster and cop comedy, and nostalgic comedy reflect a shared embrace of a value system that emphasizes a combination of pragmatism, cynicism, dissent, ruthlessness, acquisitiveness, and quick-wittedness.¹⁸ Jackie Chan's performance as an action comedian or clownish hero continued to enjoy local and global success throughout the 1990s, during which his films presented an internationalized narrative by incorporating stories set outside of Hong Kong. Given the global target audience, most of these films in the 1990s were released as Chinese New Year films—a festive genre that is defined by its time of release and always associated with comedy.

As a comic sub-genre that is culturally specific to the celebratory atmosphere and festive practices of Chinese society, Chinese New Year films are typically comedies of all types because the sense of happiness generated by these films creates an optimistic outlook at the beginning of the year. Beyond the

¹⁶ Steve Fore, "Life Imitates Entertainment: Home and Dislocation in the Films of Jackie Chan," in *At Full Speed: Hong Kong Cinema in a Borderless World*, ed. Esther C. M. Yau (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 125–26. For further writings on kung fu comedy, see Leon Hunt's *Kung Fu Cult Masters* (London: Wallflower Press, 2003) and Luke White's *Legacies of the Drunken Master: Politics of the Body in Hong Kong Kung Fu Comedy Films* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2020).

¹⁷ Chu, *Hong Kong Cinema*, 70.

¹⁸ Fore, "Life," 125–26.

idea of genre in terms of textual quality, Chinese New Year films as a temporal genre also recognize public expectations in their production and circulation. The sub-genre became popular as early as the 1930s and the number of productions peaked during the 1950s and 1960s, when there was a booming exhibition business in Hong Kong.¹⁹ Delineating the generic characteristics and tracing its early popularity, my article “Timely Festivity: Chinese New Year Films (*Hesui pian*) in the 1950s–1960s” offers an introduction to this corpus of comedy films that are locally specific. The popularity of Chinese New Year films experienced a resurgence in the 1980s through diverse forms of comedy. Interestingly, most of the best-known, blockbuster comedy films of the decade were released as Chinese New Year films, including Michael Hui’s *Security Unlimited* (*Mo dang bou biu* 摩登保鏢, 1981) and *Teppanyaki* (*Tit baan siu* 鐵板燒, 1984), the *Aces Go Places* (*Jeu gaai paak dong* 最佳拍檔) series (1982, 1983, 1984, 1986, 1989), and the *It’s a Mad Mad Mad World* (*Fu gwai bik yan* 富貴逼人) series (1987, 1988, 1989). In fact, the prosperity of Hong Kong society at that time was effectively projected through the vibrant reception of the many local film productions; at the same time, a sense of uncertainty began to emerge among people in Hong Kong with the 1997 handover approaching. Comedy films, whether family comedy, action comedy, or horror comedy, became the major emotional outlet for local audiences to give vent to laughter and temporary relief when the upcoming political changes were out of their control. Against this ambivalent social atmosphere, commercial film productions were accelerated with unprecedented success in Hong Kong over the 1980s.

In the aftermath of the Hong Kong New Wave of the early 1980s, energetic film production was also effectively represented by mainstream film companies such as Cinema City 新藝城 (established in 1980) and D&B 德寶 (established in 1984). Renowned for its unique style of “vulgar commercialism,”²⁰ Cinema City produced a vast number of hallmark comedies filled with visual gags, slapstick stunts, and well-calculated punchlines mixing vernacular jokes and Cantonese slang in hybridized comedies such as *Chasing Girls* (*Zeu neoi zai* 追女仔, 1981), *All The Wrong Clues (... For the Right Solution)* (*Gwai ma ji do sing* 鬼馬智多星, 1981), *Till Death Do We Scare* (*Siu saan pa pa* 小生怕怕, 1982), *All the Wrong Spies* (*Ngo oi ye loi heung* 我愛夜來香, 1983), *Happy Ghost* (*Hoi sam gwai* 開心鬼, 1984), *Kung Hei Fat Choy* (*Gung hei faat choi* 恭喜發財, 1985), and *The Eighth Happiness* (*Baat sing*

¹⁹ Fiona Yuk-wa Law, “Timely Festivity: Chinese New Year Films (*Hesui pian*) in the 1950s–1960s,” *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 4, no. 2 (2010): 106–9.

²⁰ Stephen Teo, “Tsui Hark: National Style and Polemic,” in *At Full Speed: Hong Kong Cinema in a Borderless World*, ed. Esther C. M. Yau (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 143.

bou hei 八星報喜, 1988). Their overall amalgamation of comic elements with highly successful box office returns proved that comedy and its hybridized forms were, without question, major attractions for audiences. It was a period when “a flood of lively films” seemed to “raise production standards while expanding the possibilities of established genres.”²¹ Yet, the triumph of Cinema City’s record-breaking comedies also meant that the space for the survival of alternative cinema was shrinking as filmmakers and investors in general were preoccupied by the commodification of films through strategies of marketing, packaging, and promotion.²²

On the other hand, D&B was the counterpart to Cinema City at that time. As a major film company that also focused on producing hybridized comedies, D&B offered a different urban outlook compared to the sensational excitement epitomized by the Cinema City comedies. As well as producing popular horror comedy and action comedy films, D&B was most well-known for its signature interest in making light situation comedies, fabricating middle-class sensibilities that either resonated with the middle-class population or reflected the aspirations of the underclass.²³ With a stress on contemporary urban settings, romantic narratives, or family stories of the everyday, films such as *My Family* (*Baat hei lam mun* 八喜臨門, 1986), *The Wrong Couples* (*Bat si yun ga bat jeui tau* 不是冤家不聚頭, 1987), *An Autumn’s Tale* (*Chau tin dik tung wa* 秋天的童話, 1987), the *It’s a Mad Mad Mad World* series (1987–1989), *Wonder Women* (*San kei leung nei hap* 神奇兩女俠, 1987), the *Heart to Hearts* (*Saam yan sai gaai* 三人世界) series (1988–1992), and *Happy Together* (*Seung gin hou* 相見好, 1989) expanded the possibilities of the genre as well as acting as a reminder of the urban romantic comedies that had been developed back in the 1960s.

POSTMODERN COMEDY, POST-HANDOVER COMEDY, AND RECENT TRENDS: THE 1990S, THE 2000S, AND AFTER

Moving into the 1990s, the impact of the Tiananmen Incident in 1989 and the upcoming 1997 handover heightened social unease. The migration wave continued throughout the 1980s and 1990s, and the ongoing populist political anxiety was most effectively reflected in the huge box office success of the political/police comedy *Her Fatal Ways* (*Biu je nei hou ye* 表姐妳好嘢, 1990) and its three

²¹ Bordwell, *Planet*, 3.

²² Pak-tong Cheuk, *Hong Kong New Wave cinema 1978–2000* (Bristol and Chicago: Intellect Books, 2008), 23–24.

²³ *A Different Brilliance: The D&B Story*, ed. Kwok Ching-ling and Wong Ha-pak (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2020).

sequels. With a plotline loosely similar to Ernst Lubitsch's *Ninotchka* (1939), *Her Fatal Ways* draws attention to and makes fun of the ideological difference between communist China and capitalist Hong Kong by having police officers from the two places collaborate on solving a criminal case. While the mainland public security officer (played by Do Do Cheng 鄭裕玲) is visiting Hong Kong and developing a crush on the Hong Kong police officer (played by Tony Leung Kar-fai 梁家輝), she also experiences the cultural shock and secret attraction associated with the capitalist, cosmopolitan urban lifestyle in the then colonial city. This carnivalesque portrayal of the mainland character is further elaborated in Stephen Chow's 周星馳 performance of a mainland spy in *From Beijing with Love* (*Gwok chaan ling ling chat* 國產凌凌漆, 1994), which is a political comedy film that continues to be cited, appropriated, imitated, and recalled among local audiences as a populist response to different moments of political instability to this day. Chow's hilarious and nonsensical performance as a comedian effectively represents the cinematic characteristics of Hong Kong cinema throughout the entire decade of the 1990s. He is a comic figure who has attracted critical interest from film scholars, and his emergence in the 1990s is explained as part of the pre-postcolonial sentiment and postmodern experience among Hong Kong citizens.

After the popular reception of his comic performance in TV dramas and following success in *God of Gamblers II* (*Dou hap* 賭俠, 1990),²⁴ Stephen Chow is most remembered and acknowledged by his nonsensical jokes, illogical puns, and bodily gestures that remind the audience of the Cantonese cinema of the 1950s and 1960s. Linda Lai Chiu-han 黎肖嫻 analyzes Chow's comic rhetoric as that of "nonsense and 'festive speeches,' free and jocular, destructive and yet creative."²⁵ Often playing underdog roles and underclass characters with transformative power, Chow's remarkable and pioneering radicality in creating parodic references or improvising nonsensical wordplay has been discussed and defined as implied critical defiance of (if not obvious resistance to) the official representations of Hong Kong's economic success, social progress, imperative submission to authority, and belief in social stability as advocated by both the

²⁴ Directed by Wong Jing, the *God of Gambler* series from 1989 warrants a separate study on the hybridization of comedy, action, and thriller with a thematic focus on gambling, as well as being a remake of Wong's TV series *The Shell Game* 千王之王 (1980). The sub-genre of gambling films emerged in the 1970s and these stories re-emerged in the 1990s in comedic form. An introductory survey of gambling films can be found in Brenda Chan's "Gamblers and Tricksters: The Forgotten Gambling Films of the 1970s," in *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 4, no. 2 (2010): 89–104.

²⁵ Linda Lai Chiu-han, "Film and Enigmatization: Nostalgia, Nonsense, and Remembering," in *At Full Speed: Hong Kong Cinema in a Borderless World*, ed. Esther C. M. Yau (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 244.

colonial and Chinese governments.²⁶ Through the self-referential decentralization of linguistic usage, Chow's comic performance appears to mischievously, yet momentarily, subvert the voice of authority and hierarchy. The high-low dichotomy is therefore overthrown in Chow's comedies. The resulting laughter could be seen as a way of transiently expressing rebelliousness without creating conflicts. Other than using this Bakhtinian carnivalesque perspective in understanding Chow's comedies, his mind-blowing performance, with its creative use of Cantonese gags, also creates a local collective identity among viewers who are more privileged in grasping the puns, since they partake in the everyday life and local popular culture at present together with the actor, having "up-to-date knowledge of contemporary linguistic practices and an appreciation for the comic defamiliarization of ordinary popular language."²⁷ At the same time, Chow's nonsensical wordplay may seem alienating and puzzling to overseas audiences outside of the Hong Kong Cantonese context. This shared sense of togetherness, according to Lai, can be seen as "solidarity-in-the-making"²⁸ during the 1990s, even when Hong Kong citizens were largely indifferent to social and political affairs.

The localization of Hong Kong culture through Stephen Chow's comic performance was further engineered by the directors with whom he collaborated. Wong Jing and Jeffrey Lau are the two major comedy filmmakers whose works significantly define Chow's comic oeuvre before he began to direct himself with *Shaolin Soccer* (*Siu lam juk kau* 少林足球, 2001), a hybrid of sports, kung fu, and Japanese manga in Chow's comic articulation. Hybridization in comedy continued to evolve over the 1990s with postmodern characteristics. In addition to Chow's parodies and pastiche, Jeffrey Lau's anachronistic tragicomedies further complicate comic subversion and the social function of comedy in expressing political frustration and releasing tensions before the handover. The two parts of *A Chinese Odyssey* (*Sai yau gei* 西遊記, 1995) generated heated discussion and debate in mainland China and Hong Kong due to Lau's bold reinterpretation of *Journey to the West*, one of the four classic Chinese novels in the history of Chinese literature. Various hybrid elements, such as Stephen Chow's role as the epic heroic Monkey King, the tragic-romantic plotline, the use of Cantonese slang, the concept of anachronistic time, and even the insertion of an English song into the ancient Chinese setting, define this postmodern adaptation as a representative comedy film of the 1990s. The concepts of history and progressive time are constantly being played down or made fun of in Lau's comedy

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 242.

²⁸ Ibid., 246.

films, as in the case of *92 Legendary La Rose Noire* (*Gau yi haak mui gwai dei haak mui gwai* 九二黑玫瑰對黑玫瑰, 1992)—a film which also reflects the trend for nostalgia films in that decade.²⁹ In this film, narrative elements and characterization inspired by 1950s and 1960s Cantonese cinema are exaggerated as hilarious comic effects, and popular memories about the 1960s become stylized as collective nostalgia.

While all these postmodern comedies of the 1990s are regarded as a form of emotional release in reaction to the approach of the 1997 handover, what would comedy films turn into when the change of sovereignty became *passé*? Approaching the new millennium, the new era of Hong Kong as a Special Administrative Region of the PRC was welcomed with global and local challenges, such as the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997, the global outbreak of SARS in 2003, and discontent about the SAR government administration since then. Unlike in previous decades, comedy films no longer dominated the local market with happy receptions. When the city was recovering from the SARS outbreak, the release of *Golden Chicken* (*Gam gai* 金雞, 2002) and *Golden Chicken 2* (*Gam gai 2* 金雞 2, 2003) provided collective therapy for people in Hong Kong who had become depressed as a result of deaths, economic recession, and an overall social pessimism. This comic rendition of the life narrative of local sex worker Ah Kum (played by Sandra Ng 吳君如) from her teenage years in the 1980s to her present-day struggle is not only an alternative vision to the grand narrative about the coming-of-age of Hong Kong, from times of prosperity to times of challenge; its farcical plot and the jesting performance of Ng also articulate the transformative situation of Hong Kong in a carnivalesque way and offer moral encouragement to its people. As Meaghan Morris summarizes, the two films “narrate popular historical experience in a way that captures something irrepressible about Hong Kong’s resilience of spirit while also anchoring this deeply local sensibility in liminal space-time configurations,”³⁰ namely the difficult experience amid sociopolitical challenges in 2003. Comic vision and laughter seem to be most demanded by people during difficult times to divert themselves from direct encounters with adversity and serve as a safety valve for those who struggle with social recovery. In the face of the declining domestic film industry in the early 2000s, filmmakers in Hong Kong seized the chance

²⁹ Ibid., 232–39. Lai’s article also examines the corpus of nostalgia films in the 1990s, among which Jeff Lau’s *92 Legendary La Rose Noire* is briefly discussed for its generic recycling from the 1960s.

³⁰ Meaghan Morris, “Hong Kong Liminal: Situation as Method,” in *Hong Kong Culture and Society in the New Millennium: Hong Kong as Method*, ed. Yiu-wai Chu (Singapore: Springer, 2017), 6.

to make co-productions in mainland China, which then became a mainstream trend in the film industry after the signing of the CEPA.³¹

The rebound in film productions in the form of co-productions, however, illustrated the changing generic trend. As Mirana May Szeto 司徒薇 and Chen Yun-Chung 陳允中 note, “although the CEPA policy deregulates the film market to allow the flexible flow of capital between Hong Kong and China, it continues to regulate the flow of ideas and of labour.”³² The centrality of the comedy genre gradually receded because localized, Cantonese gags are not easily understood by Mandarin-speaking audiences in Mainland China, and these comic elements also became irrelevant when these co-productions were dubbed in Mandarin in the mainland release. Since the local market could not compete with the gigantic mainland market, film productions gradually tended toward the interests of mainland audiences, as well as following the various regulations required for co-productions, including script approval by mainland authorities in the pre-production stage. Filmmakers like Jeff Lau and Wong Jing continued to make comedy films that recycled their previous successes. Although these films were, in general, well received in the mainland market, local audiences in Hong Kong no longer found them relevant due to their disconnection from Hong Kong’s sensibility and current reality. Instead of making highly contextualized comedies relying on verbal gags and localized plotlines, some directors focused on urban romantic comedies that were able to enjoy popularity on both sides of the cultural border between Hong Kong and the mainland, such as Edmund Pang’s *Love in a Puff* (*Ji ming yu cheun giu* 志明與春嬌) trilogy (2010–2017) and Johnnie To and Wai Kar-fai’s *Don’t Go Breaking My Heart* (*Daan san naam nei* 單身男女) (2011, 2014). Stephen Chow also relocated his production and shifted his comic traits to attract mainland audiences by developing visual gags and expanding the slapstick and action elements of his films through an increased use of CGI effects. Vivian Lee analyzes how Chow’s recent hybridization of visual gags with kung fu elements redefines his cinematic oeuvre beyond local receptions.³³

³¹ Known as the Hong Kong Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement (CEPA) signed between Hong Kong and mainland China and effective since 1 January 2004, it is a market liberalization policy that privileges Hong Kong-China co-productions for release in mainland China, bypassing the quota system that originally restricted Hong Kong films from being released there. Hong Kong-China co-productions produced under the CEPA policy also enjoy tax waivers and other benefits when entering the mainland market.

³² Mirana May Szeto and Yun-chung Chen, “Mainlandization of Sinophone Translocality? Challenges for Hong Kong SAR New Wave cinema,” in *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 6, no. 2. (2012): 119.

³³ Vivian P. Y. Lee, “The Kung Fu Hero in the Digital Age: Stephen Chow’s ‘Glocal’ Strategies,” in *Hong Kong Cinema Since 1997: the Post-Nostalgic Imagination* (Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 117–37.

The popularity of co-productions seems to have cooled down in recent years, especially after the social movements in 2014 and 2019, when the need to narrate local stories led young filmmakers to kickstart smaller, independent productions that tell stories about the underprivileged people in Hong Kong society in a solemn tone. Other than the occasional film productions of stand-up comedian Dayo Wong since the post-2014 Chinese New Year period, social satires in a comic style seem to be on the wane. Singer-comedian Ronald Cheng also made vague attempts to produce farcical comedies in post-2014 Hong Kong. The double traumas of the 2019 social movement and the global Covid pandemic, as well as the implementation of the National Security Law since June 2020, will likely lead to a renewed interest in localized comedy films as audiences lack an affective outlet to release their frustrations, and filmmakers may seek to cheer up the city with apolitical narratives. Recent comedy films such as *Chilli Laugh Story* (CLS) 闖家辣 (2022, dir. Cobra Cheng), *Table for Six* 飯戲攻心 (2022, dir. Sunny Chan), and *Far Far Away* 緣路山旮旯 (2022, dir. Amos Why) seem to grapple with this emergent structure of feeling with a result yet to be seen.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

I hope this brief historical journey through Hong Kong comedy films, and the accompanying map of generic transformations, will serve as a helpful outline and general contextualization for readers who are interested in this body of work. Given its limited scope, the article could only point out some crucial moments, characteristics, trends, and key figures related to Hong Kong comedy film from the 1950s to the present instead of offering a comprehensive examination that includes every detail. Yet, it is rather an interesting irony, if not a timely joke, that the current special issue on humor and comedies with a specific regional interest in Hong Kong cinema is to be published at a time when the genre itself is in a kind of limbo between downfall and potential revival. When people in Hong Kong can no longer resonate with laughter at cinematic representations of reality, the absurdity of sociopolitical reality further deters comedy films from being made. On the other hand, when political helplessness and social pessimism in the aftermath of recent social movements offer a/an (in)different outlook of future, this gloominess might also lead audiences to a frail desire for comedy to escape from a reality that is difficult to change. The recent absence of comedy films and their seeming resurgence since the Covid era is perhaps the excellent lacuna which researchers of Hong Kong cinema should investigate. In addition to revisiting the bygone success of these popu-

lar films, it is equally relevant to contemplate new possibilities for the comedic genre and to re-examine the limitations of academic approaches to a subject that comes to a halt, however temporary that might be.

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